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Richard Carswell, *The Fall of France in the Second World War: History and Memory*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019. ix + 283 pp. Bibliographies, notes, index. \$89.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-3-030-03954-7; \$69.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-3-030-03955-4.

Review by Sarah Fishman, University of Houston.

As the title indicates, Carswell's book explores how France's military defeat in June 1940 was understood and explained during and ever since the events. The book combines a synthetic history of the period from the prewar through the defeat with an exploration of how contemporaries experienced and remembered the events, using first-hand contemporary accounts, diaries, letters, newspaper coverage, personal narratives, and memoirs. Carswell also includes just about every historian who has written about the Fall of France from 1940 to the present. Each chapter contains a thorough bibliography listing the relevant first-hand and historical works.

For those unfamiliar with the period, Carswell provides an excellent narrative account of the series of three interlocking but separate developments in May and June of 1940: the battle in the field, the political machinations behind the scenes, and diplomatic developments between France and its ostensible ally, England. Carswell provides a clear and detailed narration of the battle itself, including military preparations, battle plans, and a dramatic day-by-day description of the military battles. He rightly warns readers not to conflate the military defeat with the political fall of the Third Republic and creation of the French State at Vichy.

Carswell reminds his readers just how difficult is to recapture the shock many people experienced just after the defeat. Notwithstanding contemporary American dismissiveness, it would have been hard to find anyone at the time who expected France's military defeat, much less how quickly it happened. To contemporaries, the magnitude of the events seemed to call for an explanation equal in magnitude, Carswell astutely notes. The result just after the debacle in June 1940 was a widespread deep dive into everything that, in retrospect, must have been wrong with France between the wars. Summarizing the tendency while underlining its blame-shifting, historian Jacques Duquesne called it a national "mea culpa' on someone else's breast." [1]

As Carswell points out, both contemporaries and historians have agreed on the significance of France's defeat, a crucial turning point converting a European conflict into a world war. The problem arises in trying to explain why it happened. Here Carswell proposes using as an analytical tool Pierre Grosser's diagnostic grid, employed more recently by Patrick Finney, grouping explanations into four "emplotments": decadence, constraint, failure, and contingency.

Carswell does an excellent job dissecting the decadence emplotment. The subthemes linked to decadence included blaming the defeat on conspiracy or treason (a so-called fifth column), seeing it as punishment for France's transgressions (France had sinned; the defeat represented divine penance) which required repentance and renewal (the National Revolution repented for France's sins and would result in a renewed, stronger France). He rightly describes the charge of decadence as vague enough to have served as a cudgel for both the contemporary right and left, although wielded more often by the right, to be fair. Finger-pointing about the defeat started the day after the Armistice was signed. First out of the block, conservative political leaders in Vichy promulgated the theme of decadence by blaming the Third Republic and its leaders for the defeat. Two years after taking power, Vichy leaders launched the Riom trials, putting on the stand key Republican leaders they blamed for the disaster. The effort backfired when former Popular Front Prime Ministers Blum and Daladier were able to show that they had increased war spending that the military had failed to use. To avoid further embarrassment, Vichy leaders adjourned the Riom trials in 1943.

Even people on the left felt that the defeat must have reflected deep decay, although they pointed to factors like fascist movements and recalcitrant industrial leaders wanting revenge for the Popular Front. Not only slippery in definition, the notion of decadence also begs the question of how far back to look. Different groups settled on different points, the far right all the back to 1789, or at least 1870, even as most observers looking for decadence focused on the interwar years.

As Carswell explains, every emplotment creates explanatory traps. They also overlap. Bad decisions were caused by constraints that resulted in part from long-term political, diplomatic, and economic problems. Even contingencies took place within the broader context of a problematic military plan and lack of effective coordination with England in preparing for and executing the battle. Still Carswell considers the four emplotments a useful analytical tool, placing them on a spectrum, with decadence on one side and contingency on the other. In between those poles, constraint centers on the infernal tangle of internal political divisions, economic stagnation, and diplomatic dead ends that limited France's ability to navigate and act effectively. Failure points to bad decisions and choices that also extended back in time, including ineffective efforts to contain Germany and the military's refusal to study and learn from the Battle of Poland during the Phoney War.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from decadence, the contingency school disputes assertions that France was unready, materially and mentally, for the war. In this emplotment, contingent military factors sufficiently explain France's defeat: messages that failed to arrive, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) launching a premature attack on May 21st, the same day a car accident injured and eventually killed General Billotte, head of the First French Army Group that was preparing to execute France's attack from the south, the Allies' last real chance of stopping German forces.

Despite the overlap and explanatory traps, the emplotment grid does help sort out the confusion of explanations. Still, Carswell wisely does not use them to structure the book. Instead, he divides the book into seven roughly chronological chapters. In each chapter Carswell provides a useful and careful narrative of the events while also exploring contemporary responses, memory, and historical explanations. After explaining the diagnostic grid in chapter one, chapter two,

“Premonitions and Predictions,” centers on the prewar years, heavy on the decadence emplotment. Chapter three, “War and Waiting,” examines the Phoney War, the nine months between the declaration of war and the start of the German invasion, a critical period of inaction that impacted both public sentiment and the morale of soldiers at the front. Here Carswell highlights many of the constraints France faced particularly in its relations with England. Chapter four, “Trauma and Treason,” covers the thirty-eight days of the battle, enumerating Germany’s daring two-part war plan contrasted with the incoherence of France’s military plan, the Breda variant of the Dyle Plan. Under that plan, France, having taken a nine month “defensive” position, suddenly launched a major offensive in response to Germany’s invasion of the Netherlands. The French offensive sent France’s First and Seventh Armies, the units with the most armored and motorized divisions, well into Belgium to fall into what turned out to be a trap. Carswell also delves into the critical lost opportunity, after Dunkirk, to execute the “Gamelin plan” to attack and pinch off the overextended German forces simultaneously using the BEF from the north and French First Army from the south. Here the failure and contingency emplotments take first place. In chapter five, “Divine Punishment and Decadence,” Carswell explores contemporary reactions in the immediate aftermath of the defeat, a period of painful searching to assimilate and understand the disaster. Chapter six, “Failures and Constraints,” examines the long list of political, military, and diplomatic failures, as well as the broader political, economic, and diplomatic constraints hindering French leaders’ ability to make good decisions.

Carswell sets out the current historical consensus in chapter seven, “Contingencies and Consequences.” Rather than pointing to decadence, constraint or failure, most historians explain the defeat in terms of contingent events and real-time responses. Finally, chapter eight, “Memory and Memorialisation,” follows the changing understanding as the events receded. Here Carswell examines personal memories starting in 1940 and moving on to memoirs published long after. He differentiates memory from “memorialization,” the broader public memory of the Fall, how it has been assimilated into the story France tells about itself and manifested in books, literature, film, commemorative events, and memorials. Although he presents and critiques the various explanations without taking a position, in the end Carswell accepts the historical consensus of contingency which, based on careful reassessments of France’s prewar preparations and mobilization of forces, rejects the inevitability of the defeat.

Carswell rightly points out and laments one profound irony. Even as historians have rejected it, public memory of the event has landed back on the original explanation of decadence. France was bad, did everything wrong, failed to anticipate or prepare, fought poorly. This public understanding, stuck on the failure, shame, and humiliation of June 1940 explains the near erasure of 1939–40 from public memory. Visiting just about any city or town in France reveals the names of the local soldiers killed in the Battle of France somewhat unceremoniously added, usually off to the side, to war memorials erected after 1918. The heroes celebrated after the war were not the men who fought in 1940, as former POWs attested and protested, but resisters, giving the public a heroic myth that, until the 1970s, included them and erased guilt. (I might add that, on this side of the Atlantic, the disdain many Americans express about France’s military campaign in 1940 is best summarized by a character from a 1995 episode of *The Simpsons* who referred to the French as “cheese-eating surrender monkeys.”)

At times I found a bit confusing Carswell’s jumping, sometimes within a paragraph, between accounts by those who experienced the events to historical works published any time after about

1950. Here the bibliographies at the end of each chapter proved extremely helpful, allowing me to follow if he was quoting a participant or a historian and when the account had been published. This approach, however, does not provide a clear sense of how the historiography of the Fall developed prior to the eventual historical consensus. As I tell my students, historians engage in a dialog with each other. Carswell's approach makes it hard to follow that dialog, or to see how historical interpretations were shaped by the context in which the history was written. The broader historical interpretation of France during the Second World War, beyond the Fall, can be characterized as pre- and post-Paxtonian, referring to Robert Paxton's seminal 1972 work, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*. Henri Rousso's *Vichy Syndrome* (1991) delineates the evolution of public memory of the war and occupation from repression to obsession. It would be interesting to know if and how those broader approaches shaped both evolving memory and historical interpretations specific to the Fall.

Also, Carswell reviews not only historians who wrote about the Fall of France, he reviews historians who have reviewed how other historians have written about the events. In 1959, for example, John Cairns, in "Along the Road Back to France 1940," reviewed how historians had written about France's defeat.[2] Carswell notes that Cairns was one of the first historians to reject earlier historians' focus on decadence, failure and constraint. In other words, this present book review reviews Carswell's review of Cairn's review of histories of the events of 1940, a remove of five steps from the events themselves!

In the end, however, Carswell's book deserves praise as an excellent and thorough account, worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the events of 1940 or in the massive literature it generated. My first book on prisoner of war wives, married to the soldiers who fought in 1940, led me to read quite a bit about the events Carswell covers, which I mention only to point out that I learned new things from reading Carswell's book and recommend it to other scholars and students interested in the Fall of France.

NOTE

[1] "...'mea culpa' sur la poitrine des autres": Jacques Duquesne, *Les catholiques français sous l'occupation* (Paris: Grasset, 1966), p. 26.

[2] John Cairns, "Along the Road Back to France 1940" *American Historical Review* 64:3 (1959): 583-603.

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